Are All Outgroups Created Equal? Consumer Identity and Dissociative Influence

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Past research finds that consumers exhibit weak self-brand connections to brands associated with outgroups. We extend this work by demonstrating that only a particular type of outgroup—the dissociative reference group—has implications for consumers’ negative self-brand connections, product evaluations, and product choices. Consumers were more motivated to avoid products associated with dissociative groups than products associated with outgroups more generally. In addition, both situational priming and chronic identification with one’s ingroup moderated the avoidance of products associated with dissociative reference groups. Further, we demonstrate conditions under which dissociative influence does not occur and discuss the implications of the research.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Past research has largely focused on positive reference groups (i.e., groups individuals wish to be associated with), identifying the central role they can play in determining attitudes and behaviors. Indeed, consumers often are influenced by members of their own group (e.g., Bearden and Etzel 1982; Moschis, 1976) and those they aspire to be like (Escalas and Bettman 2003). The current research focuses on a relatively under-examined type of group—the dissociative reference group—a group with which the individual wishes to avoid being associated and feels a sense of disidentification. The current research elucidates the role of dissociative reference group in determining consumer self-brand connections, evaluations, and choices.

Recently, Escalas and Bettman (2005) examined the differentiation between ingroups and outgroups as reference groups related to consumer self-brand connections. These researchers demonstrated that consumers have stronger self-brand connections to brands consistent with an ingroup than brands inconsistent with an ingroup, and weaker self-brand connections to brands consistent with an outgroup than brands inconsistent with an outgroup. These effects were more pronounced for brands that were relatively more symbolic (i.e., brands that communicated something to others about the user’s self-identity). Escalas and Bettman demonstrated an important point: Groups to which consumers do not belong can have implications for consumer self-brand connections. We extend this research by proposing that consumers are not always motivated to avoid outgroup memberships, and that it is dissociative reference groups in particular that will most strongly influence negative self-brand connections as well as consumer evaluations and choices.

We believe it is necessary to differentiate dissociative reference groups from outgroups more generally because while there are surely many outgroups that people are not concerned about (e.g., I am not a soccer player, but that group does not have motivational implications for me) and aspire to be members of (e.g., I am not a model, but I wish I were), dissociative groups are outgroups people are motivated to avoid being associated with (e.g., I am not a goth and I wish to avoid being associated with that group). Thus, we believe that, rather than examining outgroups more generally, it is more telling to examine the effects of specific types of outgroups.

Past research does not elucidate whether certain outgroups exert a greater influence on consumers than others. While Escalas and Bettman (2005) looked at outgroups more generally, White and Dahl (2006) have provided preliminary evidence that a specific type of outgroup—the dissociative reference group—can influence consumer evaluations and choices, in a context where self-presentation concerns are relevant. In particular, men avoided the dissociative associations of a product named the “ladies’ cut steak” when it was to be consumed in public and this tendency was heightened when the consumer was high in public self-consciousness. The goal of the current research is to clarify and extend the results of Escalas and Bettman (2005) and to integrate their findings with those of White and Dahl (2006).

In study 1, participants self-identified brands that were either associated with an ingroup, an outgroup, or a dissociative group. They reported their evaluations and self-brand connections towards these brands (along with neutral brands). Participants demonstrated the most negative self-brand connections and evaluations related to dissociative brands. Outgroups more generally, did not have as strong implications for negative self-brand connections and evaluations. In addition, we found that these dissociative effects were more pronounced when the brand was viewed as being more symbolic in nature (i.e., the brand communicated something about the consumer’s identity to others).

Because White and Dahl (2006) and study 1 suggest that the desire to present a particular image to others can motivate dissociative influence, in study 2 we wished to examine the role of the private self. Specifically, we tested whether salience of ingroup identity moderates dissociative influence. We predicted that dissociative influence would be most pronounced when the consumer’s ingroup identity is primed. We used Canadian identity as the ingroup and operationalized a dissociative identity as being American. Participants evaluated pens that were associated with groups that pretested as being dissociative (“American pen”), related to an outgroup more generally (“Belgian pen”), or neutral (“Vintage pen”). The results revealed that Canadians evaluated the dissociative option more negatively than the outgroup and neutral options, and this was only apparent when their own ingroup identity was primed.

In study 3 we examined the role of the private self in determining dissociative influence by examining the moderating role of ingroup identification. Participants were more likely to avoid choosing the dissociative option than a neutral option or an outgroup option, but only when they were high in ingroup identification. Further, these effects were mediated by a desire for private self-disidentification, but not by public self concerns.

Finally, in study 4 we examined the conditions under which dissociative influence does not occur. When situational constraints were weak consumers showed a tendency to evaluate the dissociative option more negatively than the outgroup option. When situational constraints were strong (i.e., there was social pressure to evaluate the dissociative option positively) consumers did not differentially evaluate the dissociative and outgroup options. Participants demonstrated somewhat more positive evaluations of the dissociative option when situational constraints were strong rather than weak.

Across four studies we demonstrate that dissociative reference groups have important implications for consumer self-brand connections, evaluations, and choices. Consumers showed a greater tendency to avoid products associated with dissociative reference groups than with outgroups more generally. When products were relatively non-symbolic in nature, participants only showed a tendency to avoid the dissociative product when their own ingroup identity was primed or when they were high in ingroup identification. Finally, participants did not exhibit dissociative influence when situational constraints were high. The implications of the research for theory and practice are discussed.

REFERENCES


